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ABSTRACT

Gay and lesbian adolescents are marginalized at many levels. Their needs and interests are slighted in the balance of advocacy work that purports a concern for the welfare of minority children. Their presence is overlooked in studies of youth and the mass media. Their existence is excluded from American popular culture. The symbolic annihilation of gay and lesbian youth exhibited by television in the extreme (and by most mass media in general) contributes to a dysfunctional isolation that is supported by the mutually reinforcing invisibility of homosexual adolescents on the television screen and in the real world. Such invisibility and isolation can be examined through a spiral of silence process, which outlines the reciprocal communication-based conditions through which the oppression of gay and lesbian youth is achieved. The social-psychological mechanism of the spiral of silence also partially accounts for the inefficacy of oppositional interpretive practices for disrupting pluralistic ignorance in this case; the relative ability of gay and lesbian youths to actually subvert dominant meanings, in an empowering way, is called into question. There is an exigent need for more programatic research in this area. In pursuing research within this emergent agenda, researchers must confront a number of concerns: the position of argument in social science; the methodological significance of the relationship between individuals and subcultures; the value of critical analysis; advocational possibilities relative to mainstream and alternative media resources; issues involving mediated intrusions into childhood "innocence"; and the range of uniquely severe barriers that stand in the way of research activity in this area. (Author)

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THE SOUND (AND SIGHT) OF SILENCE: NOTES ON TELEVISION AND THE COMMUNICATION ECOLOGY OF ADOLESCENT HOMOSEXUALITY

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Abstract

Gay and lesbian children are marginalized at many levels. Their needs and interests are slighted in the balance of advocacy work that purports a concern for the welfare of minority children. Their presence is overlooked in studies of youth and the mass media. Their existence is excluded from American popular culture. The symbolic annihilation of gay and lesbian youth exhibited by television in the extreme (and by most mass media in general) contributes to a dysfunctional isolation that is supported by the mutually-reinforcing invisibility of homosexual adolescents on the television screen and in the real world. Such invisibility and isolation can be examined through a spiral of silence process, which outlines the reciprocal communication-based conditions through which the oppression of gay and lesbian youth is achieved. The social-psychological mechanism of the spiral of silence also partially accounts for the inefficacy of oppositional interpretive practices for disrupting pluralistic ignorance in this case; the relative ability of gay and lesbian youths to actually subvert dominant meanings, in an empowering way, is called into question. There is an exigent need for more programatic research in this area. In pursuing research within this emergent agenda, researchers must confront a number of important concerns: the position of argument in social science, the methodological significance of the relationship between individuals and subcultures, the value of critical analysis, advocational possibilities relative to mainstream and alternative media resources, issues involving mediated intrusions into childhood "innocence," and the range of uniquely severe barriers that stand in the way of research activity in this area.

THE SOUND (AND SIGHT) OF SILENCE: NOTES ON TELEVISION AND THE COMMUNICATION ECOLOGY OF ADOLESCENT HOMOSEXUALITY

(T)he mass media . . . provide the environmental pressure to which people respond with alacrity, or with acquiescence, or with silence.

--Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann,
"The Spiral of Silence" (1974)

Invisibility is the great enemy.

--Vito Russo,
The Celluloid Closet (1981)

Introduction

Goodman, Lakey, Lashof and Thorne point out that the oppression or "domination of lesbians and gay(s) . . . does not continue by accident" (1983, p. 2). Because this domination proceeds by some design, it is reasonable to search for and articulate those processes that systematically work to maintain the oppression of gays and lesbians. Relatively little research, especially within the communication discipline, has been directed towards detailing the mechanisms that maintain (or alleviate) the oppression of gay and lesbian youth. In this essay, we examine mainstream television as one of a number of powerful social agents in the United States that work to inhibit optimum development of the gay or lesbian child. We seek

to specifically articulate the contribution of fictional television, or "entertainment" programming, to perpetuating the intense experiences of isolation and invisibility experienced by gays and lesbians, experiences that can be especially acute during adolescence. We develop an argument for considering gay and lesbian adolescents as one of the most underserved, understudied and adversely affected constituents of television's "mass audience." In proceeding with this particular contention, we also hope to more generally support efforts for enlarging the research on mass communication and human sexuality to encompass gay and lesbian realities and to connect issues associated with the experiences of gay and lesbian adolescents to established frameworks in mass communication theory.

Mediated Sexual Realities

The symbolic construction of minority identities through mediated fictions is now a well-established point of interest within mass communication research. Much of this research shares a measure of commitment to Walter Lippman's (1922/1965) classic statement on public opinion: "This, then, will be the clue to our inquiry. We shall assume that what each man does is based not on direct and certain knowledge, but on pictures made by himself or given to him." Within this light, various socioeconomic and ethnic groups, historically disenfranchised from mainstream culture and politics, have been examined in terms of their representation through mediated communication (Montgomery, 1989; Signorielli, 1985). Such examination has also been positioned within the discourse of human sexuality and gender studies (Creedon, 1989; Fejes, 1989; Kuhn, 1985; Mellen, 1977). A relatively recent and particular interest in gay and lesbian images and imaginaries has resulted in analyses of sexual identity and mass communication (Wolf

& Kielwasser, 1991). To date, this research has been characterized by a focus on print (Blachford, 1980; Corzine, 1977; Duncan, 1989; Glenn, 1981; Hoffman, 1970; Kellog, 1983; Steuernagel, 1986; Thomas, 1986; Walters, 1989) and film representations (Becker, Citron, Lesage, & Rich, 1985; Dyer, 1984; Nelson, 1985; Russo, 1987; Siebenand, 1975; Tyler, 1972). Less research has addressed homosexuality in relation to popular music (Attig, 1991; see also Avicolli, 1978; Ferry, 1985; Hill, 1986, pp. 125-141; "Pop Life," 1986) or television (Gould, 1973; Simms 1979, 1981; see also Gerson, 1977; Henry, 1987).

Systematic research into mediated communication and sexual identity has yet to become a firmly-established focus within the communication discipline, at least when compared to the traditions associated with studying the symbolic construction of occupation, religious orientation, ethnicity, sex role, and the like. Perhaps this has been so for reasons suggested by Lombardi's (1975) observation: "Gayness is even scarier to people than femaleness or blackness." Of course, the historical paucity of gay and lesbian images in mainstream, commercial mass media has also worked to inhibit certain levels of analysis.

Currently, communication researchers and more-casual observers alike regularly comment upon the unique relationship between gay and lesbian audiences and media content (e.g., Bronski, 1984; D'emilio, 1983; Lesbian and Gay Media Advocates, 1982; O'Neil, 1984). Dyer (1984, p. 1) explains: "Because, as gays, we grew up isolated not only from our heterosexual peers but also from each other, we turned to the mass media for information and ideas about ourselves." Moreover, he concludes:

> In terms of the politics of representation, fighting oppression is particularly difficult for gays because we are "invisible." The problem of identification with others as a basis for action (to defend and transform sexual practices) is then particularly

> acute and leads to the troublesome conclusion . . . that some . . . recognizable representational form is a political necessity for gay people (p. 4).

Dyer's observation as a film scholar is echoed in the "non-academic" arena. A number of well-organized lobbying efforts have been engaged by various advocacy groups that share a conviction sounded by Chris Uszler, Executive Director of the Alliance for Gay and Lesbian Artists in the Entertainment Industry: "A recent Los Angeles Times poll found that 56% of those surveyed said they did not know anyone who was gay or lesbian . . . . So how do they form their opinions? Well, certainly through friends, through religion, through their upbringing--but also through the media. And, of all those, what do we (gays) have access to? It is the media" (Vandervelden, 1987, pp. 10-11; see also Levine, 1981a, 1981b; Montgomery, 1981, 1989).

Gays and lesbians have arrived at a unique dependence upon the mass media for information about themselves, though that dependence is ironically complicated by a dearth of directly-relevant content. Since the beginning of regular network programming in 1946, for example, fictional representations of gay characters on American television have been remarkably evanescent and provisional. Within gay and lesbian culture this complication has, in fact, lead to a well-developed history of subversive deconstructions of mainstream texts, strategies for the "expression of gayness through non-gay representations" (Dyer, 1984, p. 3; see also Babuscio, 1984; Bronski, 1986; Russo, 1987). Along with other oppressed or marginalized groups (and perhaps even more than others), gays and lesbians have learned to interpret the artifacts of mainstream, heterosexual culture in ways that could make sense in terms of their own position.[1]

The general position of gays and lesbians in American society is,

in many respects, unenviable. Few subcultures have been so persistently and routinely persecuted. In all aspects of American life--political, religious, social--the oppression of gays and lesbians is quite the norm. Unlike ageism, racism and sexism, homophobia is often openly encouraged, especially amongst adolescents. Instruction in the fear and hatred of gays and lesbians begins at childhood. Sixty percent of all anti-gay assaults are perpetrated by young men under the age of 21 (Community United Against Violence, 1990). Such violence routinely involves severe physical harm, and sometimes death.

Public discussion of this oppression is characterized by an emphasis on gay and lesbian adults; politico-sexual discourse seems especially adultocentric. Gay children are thus marginalized--ignored, if you will--at all levels. Their needs and interests are slighted in the balance of advocacy work that purports a concern for the welfare of minority children. Their existence is excluded from American popular culture. Their presence is overlooked in studies of youth and the mass media.

The Context of Ignorance: Some Relevant Examples

A number of sociocultural factors can account for the absence of gay and lesbian children from commercial television and the failure of researchers to consider this absence. Perhaps foremost amongst these is the fact that the very category "gay child" remains acutely problematic (Alyson, 1980; Herdt, 1989a), especially in the context of the generalized homophobia that pervades American society (De Cecco, 1984, 1985). Childhood sexuality of any ilk, of course, still maintains the popular vestiges of taboo (Sonenschein, 1984). A conservative consensus supports restrictive social norms for the sexual expression of heterosexuals during adolescence,

and within this framework homosexual expression by children is completely intolerable. A recent example of this mind set can be found in the details of the public outcry that followed the production of a public service billboard and print ad campaign that used the image of two teen-age boys to bolster a "use condoms to prevent AIDS" message (Tuller, 1990).

Homosexual expression during adolescence is popularly "understood" only when framed within a heterosexist rhetoric of the "exploratory phase" or "curable pathology."[2] Interestingly, the image of the "homosexual phase" in childhood is frequently carried over into cultural representations of homosexuality in adulthood. Gays and lesbians can thus be characterized as developmentally retarded. The stigma of immaturity that is conferred upon homosexual adults accounts for a belief in "cures" (a movement towards "maturation"). Remarkably, such beliefs still find their way into television storylines. Writing in the tabloid Soap Opera Weekly, Christoper Schemering (1990) considers the resolution of a lesbian storyline on The Young and the Restless that involved the characters Kay Chancelor (Jeanne Cooper) and Jcann Curtis (Kay Heberle):

> With the audience reaction overwhelmingly negative, the lesbian storyline was quickly truncated, marking the first time Y&R backed away from social controversy. Bible-thumping Brock Reynolds (Beau Kayzer) stopped the women's vacation to Hawaii saying it was "unnatural," among other choice language. Then Brock told Jcann's estranged husband Jack about the situation, and Jack took Joann to bed and "cured" her.
> Call it the Big Bang theory.

The New Right continues to construct similarly heterosexist mythologies of homosexuality, but with a decidedly more explicit political inflection. Montgomery (1989) quotes public announcements from the Moral Majority in which the television networks are warned to program "to all America, not just the homosexuals and the free and extramarital sex crowd" (p. 156); Jerry Falwell, porcine icon of the "religious right," has concluded that

"obviously, the networks are more concerned about offending homosexuals than moral Americans" (p. 169). A typical mass mailing from another major television preacher, D. James Kennedy, asks for "special sacrificial gifts" (of 10, 20, 30 or 60 dollars) to help fight "network TV programs which include more anti-Christian themes than ever, ranging from bloody violence to homosexuality" (Kennedy, 1986). Most recently, Moritz (1990, p. 11) reports, the "largest current anti-gay effort is being made by the American family Federation (AFA) and by its offshoot, Christian Leaders for Responsible Television." According to Moritz (p. 12):

> An article in the January 1989 AFA Journal . . . began with the following paragraph: "Illicit sex will evidently again be the hallmark of Hooperman on ABC. The series is one of three in which ABC is promoting the 'normal, alternative lifestyle' of homosexuality." The April 1989 issue criticized Heartbeat for its "very laissez faire" treatment of lesbianism, Hooperman for "all sorts of sleazy subjects--grisly scenes from a horror movie, teen sex, homosexuality, etc.--" and L.A. Law because it "championed the cause of homosexuality, spotlighting two upstanding, positive homosexual role models."

What is significant (for our immediate purpose) is not that these groups choose to oppose gay and lesbian existence, but that issues of homosexuality are repeatedly linked to promiscuity, immorality, and "all sorts of sleazy subjects," even "blood y violence." That such links do not hold in any realistic examination of homosexuality helps to explain why the religious right views television with alarm. The medium hardly offers the level of gay and lesbian representation that vocalists for the religious right claim. But if it did, the signs of homosexuality established by these conservative groups might lose considerable force. Perhaps fundamentalist panic about television, "the menacing medium" (Jenson, 1986), is really a fear of the medium's ability for truth-telling, rather than lie-making, a fear of the medium's great, untapped potential

for homophobic attenuation. The subtext of much right wing rhetoric seems to suggest as much.

Nancy Leigh DeMoss (1986) creates a chilling mixture of patriotic rhetoric and revisionist uses of political theory, history and academic research in her slick, graphically sophisticated collection of essays, The Rebirth of America. The collection contains numerous contributions from politicians, religious leaders and other activists who exemplify the conservative backlash against the gay civil liberties movement, which began in the mid-1970s with the efforts of Anita Bryant and other reactionaries and has continued to the present with the political and economic support of the new right (Goodman, Lakey, Lashof, & Thorne, 1983; Gross, 1991). Represented in the DeMoss collection of particulate quotations, essays, and resources are Ronald Reagan, Jerry Falwell, Aristotle, Jesse Helms, William Stanmeyer, Robert E. Lee, Phyllis Schlafly, Marie Winn, and William H. McGuffey (whose 1896 readers, argues DeMoss, should still be the preferred textbooks for American children). Because it is most important to appreciate the broadbased opposition to gender equity and the particularly fierce oppression of gays and lesbians that is "rationally" advocated and acted upon everyday in our society, a few extended quotations from essays in the DeMoss anthology are included here.

In his essay, "The Myths That Could Destroy America," Erwin Lutzer (1986) presents a standard list of alarmist observations:

> The Houston Conference for Women, sponsored by N.O.W., called for federally-funded day care centers around the clock, seven days a week. Society as a whole, they insist, should bear the burden. Lenin pursued this philosophy in Russia. So has Cuba. And Communist China. It's a Marxist solution . . . . Meanwhile, in an incredibly ridiculous project, even the World Council of Churches has released a Biblical Lectionary that omits all gender-based terms, including all references to God as "He." Both the Scriptures, and the overwhelming majority of the public at large, still make clear distinctions between male and female.

> To disregard these differences is to invite disintegration of America (p. 86).
>
> One-half of all divorces take place because of adultery--often encouraged by pornography . . . . Young people particularly were bound to find ways to see sexually provocative movies. Once their appetite was whetted, they became addicted . . . . Now with the video explosion and cable TV, everything is up for grabs. Only the people of God can arrest our slide into the cesspool of sensuality (pp. 89, 90).

David Jeremiah's (1986a, 1986b) comments in the same volume are equally illustrative. As an example of "the militant and open flaunting of homosexual perversion" in America and "the many advances of the Gay Rights Movement in our country today," Jeremiah explains that: "TV and movies are treating gay themes more openly and sympathetically. ABC's hit series Soap, for example, has two homosexual characters, one a macho football player" (p. 106).

"Don't give up the fight against homosexual activism," Jeremiah warns his readers, "What is at stake is not gay rights, but God's rights" (p. 108): "It is not possible to give the militant gays what they want without sentencing millions of youth to a lifetime of misery. This is a price too high to pay. It violates the moral standards of God, is destructive to our country, and is in opposition to the best interest of our youth" (pp. 108-109). Why? Because "homosexuality destroys normal family relationships," and there's even "research" to back this up this claim:

> We must recognize the relationship between homosexuality and inadequate home life. Dominant mothers and hostile or absentee fathers are creating a predisposition toward homosexuality. Dr. Irving Bieber studied the family backgrounds of 106 homosexuals. According to his research, 81 mothers were dominating, 62 were overprotective, 66 made the homosexual their favorite child; 82 of the fathers spent very little time with their sons, and 79 fathers maintained a detached attitude toward them. The best way to stamp out homosexuality, according to Dr. Tim LaHaye, is to get back to the business of making parenthood a priority. Children raised in loving, well-disciplined homes, where mother

> and father are good role models for their children, rarely become homosexual (p. 109).

Of course, Jeremiah's conclusion exemplifies the insidious qualities of invisibility and isolation for the gay and lesbian subculture. In actuality, children raised in Jeremiah's notion of "well-disciplined homes" rarely express their homosexuality, and it is this silence that leads the author to conclude that such children simply do not exist.

Equally extreme representations of homosexuality dominate the nation's tabloid newspapers, though the organizing metaphor is typically transformed from the theological to the sensational: "An underground army of gay activists is plotting to ruin Christmas in an attempt to draw attention to AIDS," screams one lead ("Gays Secret," 1989). Another is headlined, "Love Story That Will Make You Sick: My Love Affair With A Gay Cop Killer" ("Love Story," 1989). Typical of such "news" is an article in "America's Fastest Growing Weekly," the National Examiner: "Gay Bigfoot Molesting Little Boys." According to National Examiner reporter Gus Vandermeer (1985, p.5):

> A gay Bigfoot has been caught red-handed chasing young boys . . . . At least three local (Hunan Province, China) youngsters reported having been molested by the creature . . . "We trapped the Bigfoot in a net," says one of the search party. "He didn't even struggle. In fact, he actually seemed to hang his head in shame . . . . We'll warn our boys about what this Bigfoot is interested in," (reports Zhen Guangi, one of the peasants who helped hold the beast captive).

This Bigfoot sighting was reported, like most others, along with the requisite "artist's interpretation" of the event (Figure 1). Such stories are not mirrors of public opinion; audience uses and interpretations are no doubt widely variable. But the existence of these stories is nonetheless significant, since such provocative "news" seems almost exclusively devoted to gays and lesbians. Symbolic constructions of other minorities and subcultures are not so routinely or directly reduced to the ridiculous.

MILD-MANNERED Bigfoot has more than passing interest in young boys.

July 16, '85/EXAMINER 5

Figure 1. A tabloid artist's impression of "Gay Bigfoot."

Note.
From "Gay Bigfoot Molesting Little Boys" by G. Vandermeer, 16 July 1985, National Examiner, p. 5. Copyright 1985 by Beta Publications Ltd.

The homophobia exhibited by American popular and political culture, combined with a fear of any adolescent sexual expression, conjoins with a third fear: "media-phobia." In the main, our culture has always been suspicious of the uses of mass media by youth. The history of mass communication has been colored by what Lowery and De Fleur (1983) term "a legacy of fear." The introduction and early diffusion of any new mass medium is typically accompanied by popular suspicions that the technology will wreck certain havoc, especially where children are concerned. For example, Fredric Wertham's campaign against comic books in the 1950s excited public condemnation. Amongst a host of deleterious effects, an inclination towards homosexuality was one of the results of comic book consumption. Girls who favored "Wonder Woman" were likely to become lesbians; "Batman" contributed to the homosexuality of boys. According to Wertham (1954, pp. 189-190), "Only someone ignorant of the fundamentals of psychiatry and the psycho-pathology of sex can fail to realize a subtle atmosphere of homoeroticism which pervades the adventures of the mature 'Batman' and his young friend 'Robin.'"

Popular concern over movies in the 1930s offers another glimpse into our culture's entrenched assumption that mass media are prone to corrupt children. Henry J. Forman's 1933 book, Our Movie Made Children, links together a series of interviews with delinquent youth who consistently fault the movies for inciting them to civic evil. Forman introduces a chapter on "Sex-Delinquency and Crime":

> One remembers reading often in the newspapers to what extent female delinquency has increased in recent years. We have heard of bobbed-haired bandits, female participation in kidnappings and hold-ups and many other instances. Chiefly, however, sexual delinquency is still the one great path to our correctional institutions for women. The question we are here concerned with is, To what extent do the movies with their vivid presentation of visual images, play a part in female sex delinquency? (p. 221).

Of course, the pattern that emerges suggests that the subjects were asked why they "did it," and sufficient interviewer prompting lead them to gladly (and naturally) blame an impersonal and overpowering agent. But for the author, these data clearly confirmed that, "The road to delinquency, in a few words, is heavily dotted with movie addicts..." (Forman, 1934, p. 232).

Jackaway (1990, p. 195) reports that initial reactions to the introduction of television included apprehensive tropes constructed from the terminology of drug addiction; the September 1951 issue of Parents magazine, for instance, cautioned readers about the dangers of "chain viewing." Jackaway further notes that, from the start, the networks gravitated toward conservative programming standards:

> The emphasis upon the preservation of traditional moral standards and support for figures of authority in the name of "fostering the values of American life" makes plain the influence of conservative values on those setting these regulations. Furthermore, the narrow definition of acceptable behavior and values reveals yet another instance of closed-minded denial of cultural differences among national subpopulations, and, once again, an assumption that the audience is a passive, willing and highly impressionable recipient of whatever is depicted on the video screen (p. 192).

Television in the Lives of Gay Children

Researchers generally agree that parents, teachers, siblings and peers have the most significant impact on children's development (Mussen, Conger, & Kagan, 1979, pp. 327-415). However, because of its unique place within family systems, television is also popularly and academically considered an integral agent in the cognitive, affective and behavioral processes of child development and socialization (e.g., Cross, 1983; De Franco, 1980; Lull, 1988; Dorr, 1986; Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990;

Williams, LaRose & Frost, 1981; Winn, 1985). Gross and Jeffries-Fox (1978) emphasize the importance of television as an agent of socialization simply because 98 percent of all American households have a television set, and by the time the average child reaches 18 she or he will have spent more time watching television than doing anything else, besides sleeping (Liebert & Sprafkin, 1988). In fact, research has demonstrated that children spend anywhere from two to five hours per day engaged with television (National Institute of Mental Health, 1983) and more hours of television are watched in households with children than in households without children (Woodhead, 1988). According to Nielsen estimates, children between the ages of 6 and 11 watch an average of 23 hours and 39 minutes of television each week; boys between 12 and 17 watch an average of 22 hours and 18 minutes and girls in this age group watch for an average of 21 hours and 16 minutes each week (Nielsen Media Research, 1990).

Beyond indicators of usage levels, communication scholars have also noted that the unique form of the television medium contributes to its salience for children as a source of information about the "real world." Children have easy access to television, and special skills are apparently (or at least generally) not required for television usage (Meyrowitz, 1985; Postman, 1982).

Kottak (1990, pp. 6-7) anecdotally demonstrates the central place of television in the lives of young adults as he describes the remarkable student response he gets when using The Brady Bunch in an anthropology lecture on kinship:

> . . . when I begin diagramming the Bradys, my students can't contain themselves. They start shouting out "Jan," "Bobby," "Greg," "Cindy," "Marsha," "Peter," "Mike," "Carol," "Alice." The response mounts. By the time we get to Carol and Alice, almost everyone is taking part in my blackboard kinship chart. Whenever I give my Brady Bunch lecture, Anthropology 101 resembles

> a revival meeting. Hundreds of young natives shout out in unison names made almost as familiar as their parents' through television reruns.
>
> As the natives take up this chant--learned by growing up in post-1950s America--there is enthusiasm, a warm glow, that my course will not recapture until next semester's rerun of my Brady Bunch lecture. It is as though my students find nirvana, religious ecstasy, through their collective remembrance of the Bradys, in the ritual like incantation of their names.

Montgomery (1989, p. 6) echoes the opinion of a number of media scholars that "television's greatest power is in its role as the central storyteller for the culture. It is the fiction programming, even more than news and public affairs, that most effectively embodies and reinforces the dominant values in American society" (cf. Gerbner, 1988; Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan & Jackson-Beeck, 1979). Adolescents' television consumption, of course, centers precisely upon fiction programming, constellating them as an audience uniquely served by the "most effective" aspect of television. In a study of 1,200 high school students, for example, Robert and Lichter (1988, p. 43) report that "television is a major part of these students' lives, accounting for a substantial portion of their lesiure time." Fourty percent of the subjects in this study reported watching more than four hours a day. According to Robert and Lichter, "many students see television entertainment as realistic. 40 percent of those surveyed say they learn a lot from TV. 25 percent say TV shows what life is really like" (p. 43).

As previously suggested, our current research literature is marked by an absence of research on the role of television in the lives of gay and lesbian children, and a profusion of research concerning presumably heterosexual children. Admittedly, the inspection of sexual orientation amongst adolescent subjects poses its own set of theoretical, methodological and ethical dilemmas. Researching human sexuality, and especially the

identification of sexual identities is, in short, a task resisted both by researchers and their subjects (Bullough, 1985; Deisher, 1989). In the face of this resistance, though, we can still assume that, however unwittingly, a percentage of the children studied by mass communication researchers have been homosexual children.

Herdt (1989b, p. 2) cites 1983 estimates indicating that "nearly 3 million of our country's 29 million adolescents are gay." According to Nielsen estimates, 23 percent of America's 235.23 million television viewers are between the ages of 2 and 17; children 12 through 17 years of age make up about 8 percent of that figure (Nielsen Media Research, 1990). Homosexual adolescents comprise at least five (and probably more like 10 to 13) percent of this audience (Alyson, 1980; Deisher, 1989; Goodman, Lakey, Lashof & Thorne, 1983, p. 9; Griffin, Wirth & Wirth, 1986, pp. 32-34; Heron, 1983). We can assume that homosexual children are at least as preoccupied with the medium as are "children in general." In fact, given Dyer's (1984) observation on the centrality of media for gay and lesbian persons, we might suspect an even greater interest in television on the part of homosexual youth.

Though gay and lesbian adolescents might watch much of the same television programming as heterosexual adolescents, we believe that significant differences exist in terms of interpretation and impact. This differential is a consequence of the fact that on the situation comedies, cartoons, and weekly dramas that comprise most of the programming watched by children, adolescent homosexuality is nonexistent while adolescent heterosexuality is extant. An appreciation for the potential consequences of this situation can be approached through George Gerbner's and Larry Gross' notion of symbolic annihilation (which defines the situation of

television's portrayal of young gays and lesbians) and Elizabeth Noelle-Nuemann's social-psychological mechanism, the "spiral of silence" (which suggests potential effects of television portrayals on gay and lesbian audiences).

The Symbolic Annihilation of Gay and Lesbian Youth

George Gerbner and Larry Gross (1976) introduced the concept of "symbolic annihilation" to account for the most significant inequities in the spectrum of mediated representations of social groups (see, e.g., Tuchman's 1978 analysis of the symbolic annihilation of women). Specifically considering the symbolic annihilation of sexual minorities, Gross (1991) points out:

> . . . representation in the mediated "reality" of our mass culture is in itself power; certainly it is the case that non-representation maintains the powerless status of groups that do not possess significant material or political bases. That is, while the holders of real power--the ruling class--do not require (or seek) mediated visibility, those who are at the bottom of the various power hierarchies will be kept in their places in part through their relative invisibility.

It would be hard to imagine a group more deprived of significant, independent "material or political bases" than gay and lesbian youth. They share with all children the basic restrictions imposed upon political, economic and social expression. And though they exist within the additional constraints imposed upon any minority childhood, gay and lesbian youth do not share in the array of key social allegiances, educational resources, and cultural support routinely established for other children (Martin, 1982). The most visible aspects of their subculture are exceedingly adultocentric, characterized by legal, social, financial and political barriers to adolescent participation. The relative "powerlessness" of children in general becomes most acute in terms of gay and lesbian children.

"While many minorities are similarly ignored or distorted by the mass media, " Gross (1991) concludes, "not all have the same options for resistance and the development of alternative channels." In the case of gay and lesbian youth, the options and alternatives are greatly proscribed. Even the suggestion of plans designed to provide for the needs of gay and lesbian youth are frequently met with invective; efforts for establishing educational programs for these children are routinely squashed or subjected to enormous criticism, even in school districts as purportedly progressive as those in San Francisco (Conkin, 1990) and New York City (Brody, 1989). While a small number of books and educational programs exist to serve their needs, gay and lesbian youth lack the visibility, solidarity and authority needed for organized opposition to their prevailing exclusion from the mediated mainstream of youth subcultures.[3]

Gross (1991) also touches upon the special vulnerability of lesbian women and gay men to "mass media power; even more so than blacks, national minorities, and women." Once again, this vulnerability is seen as the result of isolation and invisibility. Says Gross, "A baby is born and immediately . . . . defined as heterosexual and treated as such"; while "mass media stereotypes selectively feature and reinforce some of the available roles and images for women, national minorities, people of color, etc.," it is imperative to note that "they operate under constraints imposed by the audiences' immediate environment." Such constraints are not operative for gays and lesbians, who are typically born into environments that offer very limited experience with other members of the subculture. Indeed, the immediate environment is much like the culture at large: "fiercely heterosexual," in the words of gay activist Harvey Milk (Epstein, 1984).

Writing in TV Guide on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of network

television, Robert MacKenzie surveyed the evolution of TV heroes and offered this conclusion: "And what heroes for the next TV generation? The time is undoubtedly ripe for Asian and Hispanic heroes. A gay hero may no longer be unthinkable (but don't hold your breath). . . ." (1989, p. 39). Predicated upon assumptions that gay sexuality, and especially pre-adult homosexuality, is often too "outrageous" or "tasteless" for network television, such content is systematically restricted.[4] And though the resulting content typically ignores gay and lesbian youth all together, it is highly unlikely that members of this group of mistreated minority viewers will complain.

For all of these reasons, the status of gay and lesbian youth as a symbolically annihilated group is perhaps the most acute of all. Lacking social networks, cultural legitimacy and political leverage, the gay or lesbian child remains invisible and thus succumbs to a profound isolation. The complicity of the mainstream media in this process can be further understood through reference to some of the broader dynamics outlined in Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann's image of the spiral of silence.

The Spiral of Silence and Homosexuality

The spiral of silence is the descriptive term for a theory of public opinion developed by Noelle-Neumann (1974, 1977, 1979, 1980/1984).[5] This interactive model assumes that the most pronounced effects of mediated communication are attributable to these unique qualities of mass communicated messages:

1) Ubiquity; specific messages are delivered virtually everywhere within the social environment.

2) Consonance; the same messages tend to be distributed; the messages from various sources are complimentary.

3) Cumulation; not only do various sources distribute similar messages to all segments of society, but the process occurs again and again, continuously; these messages (and their potential influence) build up.

The result of exposure to the ubiquitous, consonant and cumulative reports of the mass media can be a "spiral of silence." According to Noelle-Neumann (1974, p. 43), ". . . fear of isolating oneself (not only fear of separation but also doubt about one's own capacity for judgement) is an integral part of all processes of public opinion. This is the point where the individual is vulnerable; this is where social groups can punish him for failing to toe the line." When certain individuals come to see that their opinions or lifestyles do not match the status quo, as defined by the ubiquitous, consonant and cumulative messages of the mass media, those individuals are less likely to express such "deviant" opinions. Then, because they do not express their opinions, the media report that such notions are "indeed" marginal after all. Thus, the spiral escalates as certain individuals become more "quiet" (isolated and invisible) and the "loud" media continue to reinforce that silence (see Figure 2). Katz (1983, p. 87) has explained this thesis succinctly:

> Individuals have opinions; Fearing isolation, individuals will not express their opinions if they perceive themselves unsupported by others; A "quasi-statistical sense" is employed by individuals to scan the environment for signs of support; Mass media constitute the major source of reference for information about the distribution of opinion and thus for the climate of support/nonsupport; So do other reference groups . . . but the relative importance of these is not clear . . . . The media tend to speak in one voice, almost monopolistically; . . . . Perceiving themselves unsupported, groups of individuals--who may, at times, even constitute a majority--will lose confidence and withdraw from public debate, thus speeding the demise of their position through the self-fulfilling spiral of silence. They may not change their own minds, but they stop the recruitment of others and abandon the fight. . . .

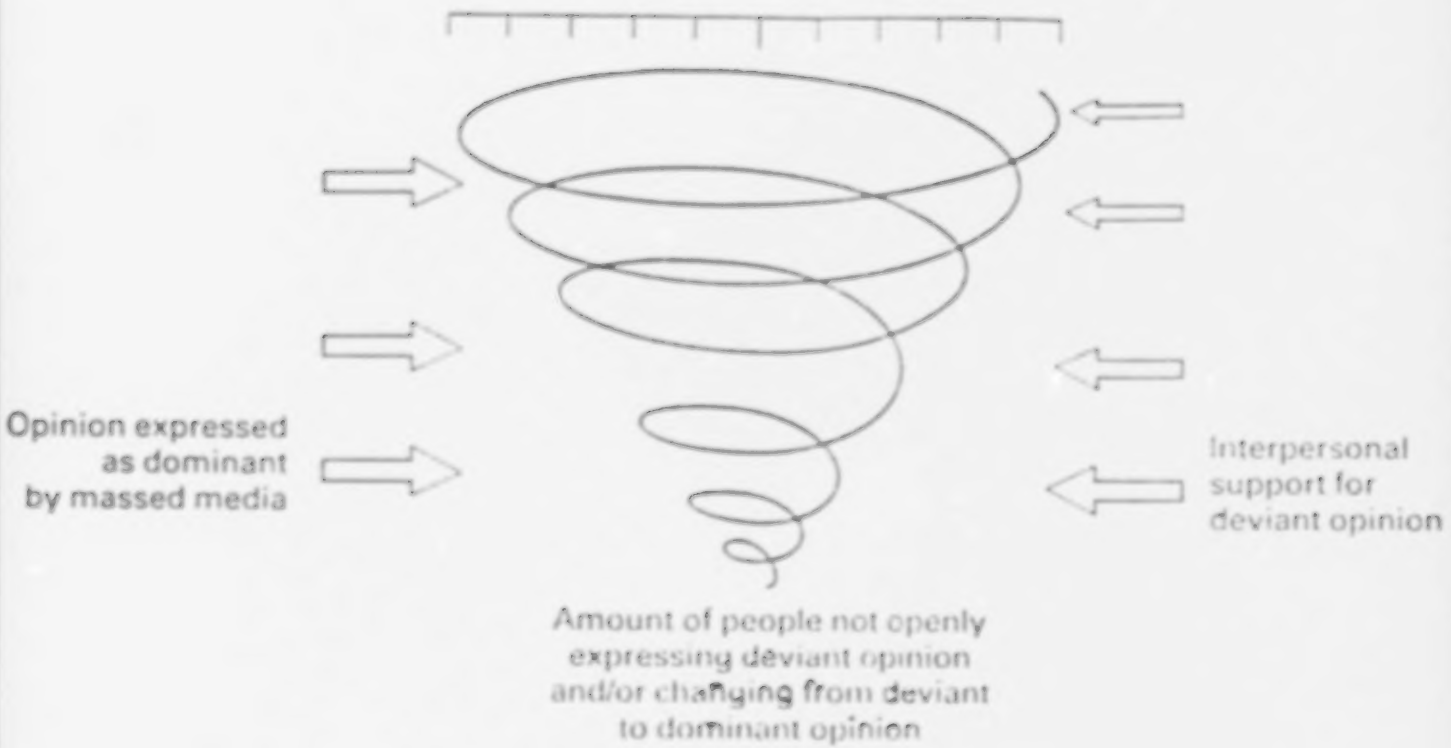
Opinion expressed as dominant by massed media
Interpersonal support for deviant opinion
Amount of people not openly expressing deviant opinion and/or changing from deviant to dominant opinion

Figure 2. Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence theory suggests that mass media strengthen the status quo and weaken the expression of deviant views. Individuals who innacit apparently deviant positions spiral into silence.

Note.
From A Dictionary of Communication and Media studies, 2nd ed., by J. Watson & A. Hill (1989), p. 120. (London: Edward Arnold). Copyright 1984, 1989 by James Watson and Anne Hill.

Taylor (1983) has tested features of the spiral of silence in conjunction with an analysis of Allport's (1924) and O'Gorman's related notion of pluralistic ignorance (O'Gorman & Carry, 1976). Taylor agrees with Katz that, "Because individuals monitor their social environment as one cue to opinion and action, opinions with visible adherents appear to be more widely held than they are in fact. The appearance of strength becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy . . ." (p. 101).

More recently, Mutz (1989) has extended the spiral of silence concept to perceptions of media effects. Mutz demonstrates that persons who perceive of an issue as important are more likely to ascribe greater media influence (upon others, not themselves) in regard to opinions about the issue (the "third person effect"). When that influence is perceived to be hostile towards the individual's opinion, there is less likelihood, in general, to express that opinion. Kielwasser and Wolf (1988) have also argued that perceptions of media effects can, in their own right, produce effects (and, thus, constitute a unique and largely unexplored class of influences).

In essence, Noelle-Neumann's concept accounts, in the extreme, for the sorts of chilling patterns of mediated communication so deftly discerned by George Orwell in 1984. To remain effectively isolated in his own silence, Winston had only to believe that the citizens of Oceania were of one opinion. And though he did not share that imagined opinion, he had come to understand that "if all others accepted the lie which the Party imposed--if all records told the same tale--then the lie passed into history and became truth" (Orwell, 1983/1949, p. 32). The individual who understands that "2 + 2 = 4" can take pride in knowing "the truth." But if this individual finds him or herself in a society that appears to consist of men and women who assert that "2 + 2 = 5," the experience of pride is replaced with a sense

of isolation, and perhaps inadequacy. In such a case, "knowing the truth" does not set you free, but locks you up.

Gay and lesbian adults frequently recall a sense of isolation during adolescence, an isolation supported and confirmed by family members, peers, teachers, and the culture at large (Harry, 1982). As such, they are actually hyper-sensitive to the climate of opinion, and thus especially vulnerable to the spiral of silence dynamic. In his collection of interviews with gay men from his Harvard graduating class, Marotta (1982) reports this typical recollection:

> From high school on I was absolutely terrified that someone would discover I was homosexual. I was convinced that if anyone I knew and cared about found out, they would totally and completely reject me. I was sure they would think me a piece of filth. well, of course, that was what I had come to feel about myself: that I was worthless, that I was a piece of shit, that I was perverted. Intellectually, it didn't bother me; emotionally, it was a disaster.
>
> So my greatest concern was to hide that one fact from everyone else. With all of my friends, my goal was to become as close as possible, to learn as much about them as possible, but to hold this one thing back (pp. 70-71).

In terms of gay and lesbian youth, the probable contributions of television to a continuing spiral of silence are obvious yet startling. While instances of media usage during adolescence sometimes provoked an initial insight into homosexuality as a phenomenon shared with a number of others, such media usage was primarily confined to print (e.g., Murphy, 1972). Television usage, when mentioned at all, is mostly remembered as the source of a few deleterious depictions of a mediated gay adulthood that did little to attenuate the anxieties of a real gay adolescence. Lacking immediate accounts by gay and lesbian youth, in fact, a useful secondary data set can be culled from the recollections of gay and lesbian adults.[6]

Armistead Maupin, a gay man and author of the popular novels in the Tales of the City series, comments on the ability of gays and lesbians

to "recognize the full scope of our homosexual population" by admonishing those who prefer the "discretion" of the "closet":

> Have you forgotten already how much it hurt to be 14 and gay and scared to death of it? Doesn't it gall you just a little that your "discreet" lesbian social-studies teacher went home every day to her lover and her cats and her Ann Bannon novels without once giving you even a clue that there was hope for your own futures? What earthly good is your discretion, when teen-agers are still being murdered for the crime of effeminacy? (Maupin, 1985, p. 295).

The observations of other gay-indentified writers are also illuminating.

In discussing "Books and the Gay Identity," Jesse Monteagudo writes:

> Even today most gay men grow up apart from other gay people. We lack the personal contact and role models which help other minority group members cope with being different. Without these role models many of us turn to books to learn more about ourselves. We search in books for information and reassurance . . . . I had no role models who could help me come to terms with my emerging sexuality . . . . the only (mis)information I had was my friends' fag jokes, my father's admonitions about being picked up by homos, a couple of swishy stereotypes who lived in the neighborhood, and a misleading television documentary which appeared in the wake of Florida's attempt to purge its schools of gay teachers in 1964. The view of gay life I gleaned from these fonts of knowledge was a twilight world of drag queens, child molesters, and sex in public toilets. Had I had access to a body of gay-positive literature, I would have had an easier time coming to terms with myself (Monteagudo, 1985, pp. 210, 211).

From a similar vantage, lesbian activist Karla Jay recollects:

> When I was growing up, I thought that I and perhaps one or two other people were the only homosexuals who had ever existed. I felt very alone, and yes, very "queer." I read everything I could find, hoping that there were other people, even fictional ones, like me, that there were people with whom I could identify. But I read works from Socrates to Oscar Wilde, without discovering that I was not alone because the critics, instead of pointing out my tribespeople, denied their existence, and because the scholars would rather cut off their hands than put the work of a homosexual as a homosexual work in a school library (Jay, 1972, p. 68).

Journalist Darrell Yates Rist recounts this conversation with a friend while watching a gay pride parade in Chicago:

> "Gays shove everything they do in people's faces," he spits <u>sotto voce</u>. "Why should anyone put up with this? Let me tell you

> something, if I had kids"--he backhands the air towards a man, a woman, and two small boys (the four of them delighted by a drag queen's dole of cock-shaped candies)--"I'd do everything I could to stop it."
>
> At this I heat. "When I was a kid, I'd have been a hell of a lot happier," I object, almost hissing, "if I'd seen just one thing like this and learned that I wasn't the only one like me alive." (Rist, 1985, p. 45).

Of course, these reports cannot be construed as the results of any sort of controlled sampling of childhood experiences; yet, they do point decidedly to a widely-acknowledged, consistent set of phenomena. Additionally, similar observations have been made in clinical settings, where counseling adolescents has revealed that, "'falling in love,' having a 'crush,' or feeling 'sexually aroused' are all terms which are usually evoked in a heterosexual context. Initially, they do not translate easily to describe feelings for people of the same sex . . . .Thus, without a vocabulary to articulate homosexual feelings, a youngster often believes no one else in the world feels that way" (Schneider & Tremble, 1985, p. 77). Clinical psychologist Don Clark (1977) explains the experience of being gay as typically involving years of emotionally damaging "invisibility," during which an individual is quite aware of her or his homosexual identity but does not receive (and ultimately chooses not to receive) social validation in that regard:

> We see men and women set up as heterosexual models for expressing those (sensuous and erotic) feelings to one another. We see it in the family, on the street, in magazines, movies, and on TV. Thus do we shape our idea of what is right, normal, natural, and good. Never do we see loving expressed by two men or two women. Our inner truth is not validated visibly; we have no models . . .. Privately we grow up during the invisible years suspecting that there must be many basic things wrong about us (Clark, 1977, pp. 30-31).

All of these observations can be clearly apprehended within spiral of silence dynamics. The mainstream media--particularly television--

offer no signs of support for the developing gay or lesbian youth. These youth are victims of symbolic annihilation; only adult expressions of homosexuality have achieved even minimal representation on television. Furthermore, the total text of commercial, network television is effused with signs of support for the sexual-romantic experiences of heterosexual youth. Every evening, the teen-age inhabitants of television fall in love, kiss, cuddle and date; they occupy a substantial amount of prime time with their dramatic or comedic considerations of sexual intercourse, marriage, child-rearing and family-making. The wide spread existence of exclusively heterosexual teens and their values is exaggerated to the point of absolutely occluding deviations. For homosexual youth, the message--ubiquitous, consonant and cumulative--is that only heterosexual adolescents "matter," only heterosexual rituals of teen-age life are acceptable and communicable. In short, gay boys and lesbian girls had best remain "silent," preferably through strained and painful imitations of the televised signs of heterosexual adolescence. Adding insult to injury, gays and lesbians who eventually initiate tentative steps towards "coming out" are routinely "accused of being silent and reserved, and of not sharing ourselves and our lives with our families" (Goodman, Lakey, Lashof, & Thorne, 1983, p. 17). The spiral of silence dynamic can be further elaborated by moving from this review of audience experiences to taking a further look at some relevant examples of television content.

Gays and Lesbians in Prime Time

Though the practice of engaging in subculturally-bounded, oppositional interpretations of heterosexual constructions continues to characterize gay and lesbian media usage, there has been an increase in overtly homosexual

television content in recent years (Montgomery, 1989, pp. 75-100). While such televised images are seldom considered entirely adequate, there is some consensus that portrayals of gay and lesbian characters on mainstream American television have at least evolved from a standard collection of pathetic and pathological stereotypes (Pearce, 1973) to a more "balanced" rearticulation of the experiences of gay adults in American society (Lewis, 1982). In recent programming history, in fact, these images have often been diagnosed as "acceptable" by the gay community. Acceptability, as Gross (1991) explains, has meant only that a particular portrayal "was not an attack on our character and a denial of our basic humanity; (but) it could not be mistaken for an expression of our values or perspectives." Such acceptable symbols are exemplified by the lead character in the first made-for-television movie on AIDS, An Early Frost, about whom Weiss (1986, p. 6) observes: "We know he is gay because he tells his disbelieving parents so, but his lack of gay sensibility, politics and sense of community make him one of those homosexuals heterosexuals love." Film critic Richard Lippe agrees. Comparing the roles of "gay son" in An Early Frost and Consenting Adult, Lippe (1986, p. 84) observes:

> These gays appear to be "normal" men; hence their integration into the family and other dominant social structures doesn't seem to be quite so impossible. Their normality/respectability is what makes them socially acceptable; it also tends to make them invisible as gays. In An Early Frost and Consenting Adult, this invisibility includes the non-existence of gay communities and the possibility of gays having recourse to emotional support from gay and non-gay friends.

In a similar vein, NBC's series Love, Sidney cast Tony Randall in the lead, as a gay man who was imperceptibly gay. According to William A. Henry, drama critic for Time magazine, "Sidney never had a boyfriend or even a social life among other aging gay men: He was a homosexual without a context" (1987, p. 44). This situation has provoked responses from the

gay and lesbian community that are similar to those from black groups, which in the mid-1970s faulted comedies like Good Times and The Jeffersons as being "about blacks but not for blacks" (Montgomery, 1989, p. 74). Gay and lesbian characters typically conform to heterosexual expectations and, at their best, work simply as mechanisms for explaining homosexuality to heterosexuals: "The central action is the process of acceptance--not self-acceptance by the homosexual, but grief-stricken resignation to fate by his straight loved ones, who serve as surrogates for the audience" (Henry, 1987, pp. 43-44). The networks have yet to produce a gay or lesbian character for gay and lesbian audience members.

No Kissing, No Keepers, No Kids

The representation of gays and lesbians on television is still marked by the absence of any overt signs of homosexual affection. Montgomery (1989, p. 93) reports, for example, that in 1976, "Gay characters appeared in at least seven situation comedies and in several television movies . . . ." Yet:

> Most of the characters appeared one time only in the sitcoms and vanished the following week. Generally, the focus of the plot was on the acceptance of gay characters by the regular heterosexual characters. Very few gay couples were shown, and they were not permitted to display physical affection. In an episode of Sirota's Court, the judge agrees to perform a wedding ceremony for two gay men . . . . At the end of the ceremony, the judge pre-empts a possible kiss of the two newlyweds, and orders them to shake hands.

Today, gay and lesbian characters are still routinely denied expression of such minimal acts of affection and love. An espisode of AEC's thirtysomething that showed two gay men in bed together (one of them smoking the tell-tale cigarette, no less!) proved so controversial (and, apparently, unprofitable) that the network decided not to re-run the program in the

Summer of 1990. The episode might never be seen again, though executive producer Edward Zwick says thirtysomething is "not abandoning the gay theme, and we have ABC's assurance that we can continue" (Galloway & Ormand, 1990, p. 25).

Though gay and lesbian adults are sometimes "acceptably" portrayed--sans kissing--their longevity remains short. Few roles are kept in motion beyond a single episode. As Dorothy Gale muses in The Wizard of Oz, these characters "come and go so quickly here!" Most striking, however, is the extent to which television's continuing series utterly ignore the existence of young homosexuals. Indeed, the anemic history of gay and lesbian representation in prime time can be sumed up quite succintly: No kissing, no keepers, no kids.

The "ground breaking" 1972 made-for-television movie That Certain Summer created a wave of controversy in response to its story line, which detailed the experiences of a father explaining his homosexuality to his adolescent son (Cross, 1983, pp. 96-97; Montgomery, 1989, pp. 75-78; Russo, 1981, pp. 221-224). Certainly, ABC's standards and practices personnel at the time would have found any treatment of the obverse scenario fully cut of the question; in 1972, the networks didn't want to tell a story about an adolescent son who explains his homosexuality--in no uncertain terms--to his middle-aged father.

The networks still hesitate to tell that story. According to Henry (1987, p. 45), "Children's shows of course never acknowledge that such a way of life exists, although many adult homosexuals report having been aware of their specific sexual identity by age four or five." Any sampling of prime time programming or syndicated kidvid will verify this situation. Teen-age oriented series like Head of the Class, Doogie Howser, M.D., Wonder

Years, A Different World, Superboy, Saved By the Bell, My Secret Identity, and Outsiders offer no continuing gay or lesbian characters (and, in fact, have not addressed homosexuality in any fashion). Viewers of the TV series Fame have been treated to an incredulous picture of a New York City High School for The Performing Arts at which no gay or lesbian students are enrolled. Homosexuality is apparently not one of the Facts of Life nor part of any adolescent's Growing Pains. A young lesbian character might be introduced on 21 Jumpstreet, but only as a provisional dramatic device, a point of conflict to be solved away. Moreover, by the episode's conclusion the young women's identity is established as that of a sort of "potential" lesbian who, according to series regular Holly Robinson, "doesn't know if she's gay or not. She's mixed up" (Ormand, 1990).

The new crop of teen shows for the Fall 1990 season--such as Hull High, Guys Next Door, and Ferris Bueller--promises to continue this trend. Hull High is an interesting mixture of comedy, music and sensuality in a high school setting, a program just innovative enough to ensure that it will become (at least for a moment) the darling of professional critics. The series premiere (NBC, August 1990) was permeated with sexual tension. In one scene, a new female teacher asks to be observed by a more experienced male colleague, so that he might offer some feedback on her pedagogical finesse. In the course of this classroom observation the gentleman's mind drifts into a musical fantasy number, "Figure of Speech." The shapely new teacher, clad in a form-fitting red leather suit, sings about metaphor and simile while she is groped by the young boys in her English class. Needless to say, all of the boys in the class were eager for a feel--no gay young men here. Female teens were excluded from the bacchanal--there's no room for lesbians in this English class, either. In fact, it doesn't

seem that there's a gay or lesbian person of any age to be found on the campus of Hull High, despite the program's penchant for unusual forays into rhythmic masturbatory fantasies.

Though there have been no continuing gay or lesbian adolescent characters on television, there have been references to adolescent homosexuality in a handful of made-for-TV movies (Henry, 1987). Typically, such references construct adolescent homosexuality not as a cultural position but only a sexual activity. Certainly, these have not been films about "young gay love." In many cases, little or no connection is made between sexual activity and the larger features of gay and lesbian culture, and the notion of homosexuality as a "phase" experience is reinforced. If homosexuality is defined by genital activity, then gays and lesbians can relinquish their homosexuality simply through "doing it" with the right partners (or lack thereof). This genital activity, furthermore, is indentified as the result of some intense, over-powering social force, such as imprisonment (Born Innocent), poverty (Alexander: The Other Side of Dawn) or a hostile family environment (Dawn: Story of a Teenage Runaway). Thus, it seems that on television a young straight male may ponder the loss of his virginity as part "growing up" (James at 15). A similar experience for a young gay male might require that he be the poverty-stricken child of abusive and alcoholic parents, and that he has been arrested for prostitution and is serving time in the dark and sexually violent recesses of juvenile hall (Charles Manson at 15?).

While it is at least conceivable that gay and lesbian youth may yet find "acceptable" representation on the periphery of a network series, the value of such marginal depiction is itself questionable. Commenting on the controversy surrounding his production of an episode of Maude that

concerned abortion, Norman Lear explained his decision to let the lead character decide on an abortion (rather than a peripheral "pregnant best friend" introduced for one episode): "I realized the only way to engage the audience's interest was to let Maude get pregnant" (Montgomery, 1989, p. 31). Lear's bold move stands in contrast to television's treatment of gays and lesbians; continuing roles are exceedingly rare. A gay Alex Keaton is apparently unthinkable.

In addition to restricting the status of continuing characters to exclusive heterosexuality, program creators frequently demonstrate (with varying degrees of subtlety) a concerted effort to annihilate even a hint of homosexuality on the part of teen-aged characters. For example, in an otherwise exceptional two-part episode of Head of the Class (ABC, July 1990), the students of Fillmore High go about the business of rehearsing for the school's upcoming production of Hair. A teen-aged boy and girl audition by singing part of the "White Boys/Black Boys" number.

This number was sung by female characters in the original stage play (Ragni & Rado, 1969, p. 135) and is performed by both men and women in Milos Forman's (1979) much-acclaimed film version (where the number was constructed as pure camp). In part, the lyrics are:

> White boys give me goose bumps
> white boys give me chills
> when they touch my shoulder
> that's the touch that kills

The auditioning TV teens at Fillmore High make a crucial, and expected, alteration: the female character sings, "white boys give me goose bumps," and her male companion intones the reply, "white girls give me chills."

Later in the episode, Mr. Moore, the hip history teacher played by Howard Hesseman, is seen defending his decision to let the children put on this play. To an angry colleague, he declares that, "this play, this

musical, celebrates freedom . . . and condemns stupidity." Ironically, Moore/Hesseman could not, in this case, make the same argument for Head of the Class. Though the series frequently addresses sexism, freedom of expression, and racial equality, Head of the Class not only precludes the natural existence of gay or lesbian high-school students, but subtlely erases any potential signs of homosexuality amongst all of the series' characters, continuing or otherwise. Other prime-time series are not only similar in this regard, but are quite often worse.

The Sights and Sounds of Silence

The symbolic world of network television affirms the apparent belief that no one shares the experiences of the young gay or lesbian viewer. In reaction to this perceived isolation, these real-world youth apparently refrain from expressing their sexual identity or participating openly in their subculture. They become even more firmly isolated in this way, even more invisible to each other and to society at large. Consequently, television portrayals continue to "reflect" and affirm an adolescent status quo that lacks any significant expression by young gays and lesbians, bringing the spiral of silence process full-circle. Television programming thus contributes to the invisibility and isolation of gays and lesbian youth even as the medium "reports" the existence of that situation.

Following Mutz (1989), we can further hypothesize that gay children actually over-estimate the influence of television programming on their peers. Important to all teen-agers, the rituals of romance and sexual development take on an even greater significance and urgency for oppressed gay teens; their own romantic inclinations, socially constructed as pathological, demand the exhaustive attention given to any "terminal illness."

Consequently, the distinctive salience of sexually-oriented television images--the most prevalent signs of young love in American culture--is likely to be greater for the gay or lesbian viewer, a phenomenon that further exacerbates the "silencing" process previously outlined.[7] So despite the fact that television has little or nothing to specifically offer them, gay and lesbian adolescents are particularly drawn to the medium's symbols of adolescent sexuality, to which they attribute greater significance than their heterosexual co-viewers.

Finally, it is essential to consider the likelihood that oppositional readings of media texts do not, for gay and lesbian youth, foster the recognition of social allegiances necessary for "breaking the silence." We reject any analysis of television that simply "assumes a monolithic ideological focus and fails to account for variable readings of the text" (Tankel & Banks, 1990, p. 285). The gay teen-ager can certainly recast the televised world of "boy meets girl" into one of "boy meets boy" or "girl meets girl." But this personal interpretive move does not alter the situation of pluralistic ignorance, "in which individual members of a group believe incorrectly that they are each alone or the only deviants in believing or not believing in particular values, while in reality many others ... secretly feel exactly as they do" (Theodorson & Theodorson, 1969, p. 301).[8] Consequently, we question the extent to which such opposition is truly "resistant" in terms of empowerment.

The degree to which the sorts of isolated oppositions noted above empower the individual is slight indeed. Such oppositional interpretations can be considered resistant and empowering to the extent that begging resists the oppression of capitalism and empowers the beggar. An impoverished pan-handler can collect enough money to eat a meal, but might not feel

very positive about that "achievement." The achievement of oppositional interpretations might be no more empowering to individuals who feel they are piecing together relevant meaning from the scraps of someone else's ideological table. From the standpoint of self-esteem and other qualities of psychological health, the empowering capacity of a resistant interpretive action is dependent upon the social situation in which the individual perceives him or herself to be situated. Interpretive subversions of mainstream texts are empowering to individuals who share a sense of collective subversion, of belonging to a legitimate social category of others who perform similar acts of oppositional interpretation. The empowering virtue of an oppositional stance might, in fact, be limited to such individuals.

In addition to these more specific constraints, some media scholars have convincingly argued that the ability of audiences to autonomously read just about anything into "polysemic" texts has been generally overestimated (Biocca, 1988; Carragee, 1990; Condit, 1989). Oppositional readings might not represent radical subversions but conservative negotiations that, while variable, still fall in step with the dominant (preferred) meaning of the text (Grossberg, 1988, p. 13). Young audience members are no more intrinsically capable of subverting preferred meanings than adults are; indeed, the ability to make resistant uses of mediated texts might be a developmentally-acquired skill, leaving young gay and lesbian audience members at a further disadvantage. On the whole, then, it appears that the efficacy of interpretive opposition is significantly diminished for gay and lesbian youth.

Research Problems and Potentials

In this essay, we have advanced an argument in support of the following

conclusion: The symbolic annihilation of gay and lesbian youth exhibited by television in the extreme (and by most mass media in general) contributes to a dysfunctional isolation that is supported by the mutually-reinforcing invisibility of homosexual adolescents on the television screen and in the real world. Such invisibility and isolation can be examined through a spiral of silence process, which outlines the mutually reinforcing conditions through which the domination of gay and lesbian youth is achieved. The spiral of silence process also partially accounts for the inefficacy of oppositional interpretive practices for disrupting pluralistic ignorance in this case; the relative ability of gay and lesbian youths to actually subvert dominant meanings is called into question.

Given the exploratory nature of this essay, the fundamental outcome of our analysis is the expected one: Much more programatic research is needed in this area. We agree with Gross (1991): "One may be able to reduce one's own irritation by ignoring the media, but their insidious impact is not so easily avoided. What can't be avoided, however, can be better understood, and studies of lesbian and gay audiences and their responses should be included in the emerging research agenda."

The Position of Argument

The nature of this research requires explicit attention not only to the gathering of data and the building of theory, but to issues of personal politics and social advocacy. "In short," Anderson asserts, "the business of inquiry is to create meanings from which we can act. It is not to reveal the world to us but to create some part of the world for us" (1989, p. 2). His point is especially well-taken here. Where the investigation is of the social forces that maintain the oppression of research subjects

who are systematically denied the possibilities of empowerment, the researcher is likely to act from an unusually explicit recognition of the desired shape of his or her particular piece of the world-in-creation. Thus, the argumentative stance of such research is typically quite visible; this quality is sometimes irritating to readers, and may even provoke outright condemnation from the ranks of the positivist police who patrol our conferences, publishing houses and (especially) the editorial offices of some of our discipline's less-imaginative journals.

Research is always coincident with argument; data cohere into recognizable rather than representational realities (Anderson, 1989), especially when enjoined as description of some quality of human experience. Yet, the more-explicit quality of advocacy sometimes misleads critics into faulting the existence rather than the nature of an argumentative stance. Institutionalized standards of evaluation also work to limit the acceptable place of extant argument to political and cultural analysis. Thus, for example, the experimental form privileges issues of method over issues of argument as one (misleading) means of pushing this research towards that penultimate state of good science--the value-free endeavor. An obsessive attention to method also distances the researcher from moral responsibility (Anderson, 1989). And while such distancing seems ethically indefensible in its own right, it no doubt makes the business of research a much less complicated labor. In the more extreme of these misleading formulations, the social scientist is (self)identified as the least culpable amongst any of those laborers who are somehow responsible for the impact of their work; the barber is more accountable for his actions than the sociologist since the latter uncovers the world (as it is) while the former recreates the world (usually as someone wishes it to be).

The implicit or deflected position of argument in much research on youth and the mass media is actually another agent in the oppressive routines described throughout this essay. The argumentative stance of previous research, once it is excavated, demonstrates an obvious ideological inflection--heterosexism--for which researchers routinely deny responsibility.

Individuals and Subcultures

Ideally, research projects would begin with intensive and direct empirical explorations of the relationships between gay and lesbian youth and television (or other mass media). Methodologies preferred by researchers who proceed from interpretive and social action theories seem especially suited to this task (e.g., Crow, 1981; Lemish, 1985; Lindlof, 1987; Lindlof & Traudt, 1985; Lull, 1985, in press; McCain, 1982; Morley, 1986; Wolf, 1985, 1986a, 1986b; see also, Anderson & Avery, 1988; Anderson & Meyer, 1988; Traudt, Anderson & Meyer, 1987). Research along this tack typically shares Morley's (1983, p. 108) goal: "We are therefore proposing a model of the audience, not as an atomized mass of individuals, but as composed of a number of subcultural formations or groupings whose members will share a cultural orientation towards decoding messages in particular ways."

In a discussion of media research and ethnicity, Traudt (1990) underscores the need for greater sensitivity to diversity within broader classifications. He notes: "Media research has often treated all Hispanic peoples as one in the same, as has related inquiry into both mediated representations and media-exposure patterns for Blacks, Orientals, and Native Americans" (p. 247). As it evolves, research concerned with gay and lesbian representations and media usage should recognize the limitations of broader classifications and systematically work beyond them (Our essay

does this, in fact, to the limited extent that gay/lesbian youth and gay/lesbian adults are established as as groups whose relationships to television cannot be adequately explored through a broad focus on "homosexuals").

In his essay, Traudt specifically discusses the utility of phenomenologically-sensitive research conducted in natural settings as a means of examining, "how individuals, noted for their common ethnic membership, utilize the mass media to make sense of their everyday worlds within and outside their immediate ethnic culture" (1990, p. 247, emphasis added). The research agenda for homosexual youth and mediated communication should include such case studies, as well. It is imperative to understand how an individual's life is enacted through the framework of a subcultural identity, where an understanding of the subculture itself proceeds from the apprehension of phenomenological signification at the molecular level (e.g., Drew, 1989; Lull, 1986), rather than the obverse (where the individual is presumably understood through consideration of a subcultural aggregate or category). Reviewing the general literature on gay and lesbian youth, Herdt (1989b, p. 3) also advances an ethnographic approach in order to construct research ". . . in terms of the words and experiences of adolescents themselves."

Critical Analysis

As previously indicated, however, access to any samples (let alone "representative" ones) of gay and lesbian adolescents promises to be a difficult task for the mass communication scholar. Here, the social forces that compel invisibility and isolation are uniquely problematic in that they also inhibit access to the persons upon whom these forces act. Thus,

given the hypothesis that television encourages children to remain silent about their homosexuality, the researcher is caught in a sort of "catch 22" that requires that the silence be broken in order for it to be measured. Questions must be answered in regard to how the researcher is to go about identifying subjects, and whether or not such identification affects a severe rupture of the social process originally intended for analysis (quite possibly obliterating the process, in fact). Yet, while such questions are particularly urgent here, they are common to all endeavors in communication research (Anderson, 1987; Anderson & Meyer, 1988). We expect that imaginative yet rigorous procedures can be devised to overcome these dilemmas, and methodological innovation should be placed especially high upon the research agenda in this area.

Without adequate access to a range of subjects, what other research options exist? Certainly, the large volume of work done from the vantage of television criticism, political and (pop)cultural studies, feminist television theory and related frameworks can be usefully built around an inquiry into television and homosexual youth (much as such perspectives have already been used--to a limted extent--for analyses focused upon gay/lesbian adults and adult-oriented gay/lesbian media). Privileging conceptual (frequently political) apprehension over positivistic analysis, most of these approaches do not rely upon direct inspection of "representative" audience practices. Yet the obvious limitations of such privilege may be diminished by the particular suitability of these methods for study of the phenomena involved here. At its best, such "critical labor" specifically articulates the "political valences" associated with the ways "people recognize and transform themselves and their world within existing popular culture practices" and "the radical diversity of (and

differentiated access to) practices and investments in which we are all implicated" (Grossberg, 1988, pp. 13, 69).

Thus, in addition to the academic merits of such work, there is an advocational benefit to be derived as well. Cultural studies scholars cannot presume to speak for gay and lesbian children, but they may certainly speak about them in such a way that these constricted young voices achieve greater volume for their own plain-spoken discourse.

Advocacy: Mainstream Access and Alternative Media

At the level of personal politics and social activism, organized response by advocacy groups to the general issue of the mediated representation of gays and lesbians has historically been two-pronged. Groups have worked at seeking access to and representation in the mainstream media and/or creating alternative media forums of their own.

Seeking media access, these groups continue to pressure the networks for better representation in all programming areas, with an emphasis on AIDS-related themes over the past few years (Whetmore & Kielwasser, 1991; Russo, 1985). Contemporary efforts on this front remain very similar to the goals articulated by the National Gay Task Force in 1979: "increased visibility, elimination of stereotypes, (and the inclusion of) continuing gay and lesbian characters, and gay couples" (Montgomery, 1989, p. 87). In some instances, the "elimination" of stereotypes has given way to a more informed request for the development of a broader range of benign stereotypes, reflecting a sensitivity to the essentially formulaic qualities and the conventions of stereotyping that characterize the television form (cf. Dyer, 1984, pp. 27-39).

Beyond seeking improved representation in the mainstream media,

activists have undertaken the creation of their own mediated realities. Such endeavors are exemplified by the existence of various gay presses, community access television shows, radio programs, and independent film productions. Gross (1991) concludes that such work is possibly the only viable alternative open to gays and lesbians:

> The most effective form of resistance to the hegemonic force of the dominant media is to speak for oneself. . . . Gay people have not yet achieved the degree of social power and legitimacy which would permit them to demand . . . self-censorship on the part of the media, and consequently we are still treated to gay villains and victims unbalanced by gay heroes or even just plain gay folks. . . . Could we hope for much more? Probably not, since the numbers simply aren't there to put sufficient pressure on the media--and numbers are the bottom line. We might exact concessions along the way, forcing some respect for our humanity, but we cannot expect the media to tell our stories for us, nor allow us to do so through their channels.

Shared by a number of scholars and activists, Gross' position is consistent with classic observations made by Paulo Freire (1970). Arguing that the oppressed do not somehow exist "outside" of society but are oppressed precisely through their location within the social fabric, Freire advises: "The solution is not to integrate them into the structure of oppression, but to transform the structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves'." Historically, alternative media have served as the agents of such transformation (Downing, 1990).

In particular, research has demonstrated the ability of alternative television programming to help young children become accustomed to counter-stereotypical behavior, establish new and lasting norms for acceptable behavior, and "develop more positive attitudes toward others who choose nontraditional pursuits" (Johnson & Ettema, 1982, p. 223). Such results suggest the hopeful outcomes that could eventuate for <u>all</u> viewers, homosexual or heterosexual, through participation in mediated worlds that include prosocial gay and lesbian portrayals. Indeed, emergent gay and lesbian

Significantly, gay and lesbian youth are more restricted than their adult counterparts in their ability to engage alternative media, "to hear their own stories and speak for themselves." Thus, while alternative media might be the best hope for gay and lesbian adults, the mainstream media could be the only option for many adolescents.[9] Future research must take careful account of the differential possibilities for access to alternative and mainstream media that exist for particular segments of the gay and lesbian audience, as well as for the audience as a whole.

Ultimately and unfortunately, all of these various possibilities for research and intervention are united by their location within the general constraints imposed by the institutional, historical, and socio-cultural forces mentioned in this essay. Irrespective of their method or mechanism, strategies for constructing gay and lesbian youth as visible identities within the popular of American television elicit confrontation with these formidable barriers.

Existing within as well as outside of the gay and lesbian community, these barriers are built upon a broad, generalized homophobia, though they are manifested in many particular ways. They arise from the salacious suspicions that are too-often directed at any interest by gay adults in gay children; as a subcultural category, homosexuality is unique in the extent to which adult interests in child welfare are, without reason, routinely perceived as prurient. These barriers also involve the fusion of the full array of interests that are vested in resisting sex-role flexibility and the erotic empowerment of children. These barriers are the result, as well, of the insidious obstructions of heterosexism and the heterosexual assumption; the myriad actions, tacit and conspicuous, of ostracism and annihilation, oppression and abuse. The possibilities

for research in this area are thus enclosed within limitations that are unique in number and severity, articulating strictures that are as ideological as they are methodological. But these limits need not prefigure pessimism or failure. Intellectual history is best told, after all, in stories of the difficult task.

Of course, the possibilities for advocacy and intervention inhabit an enclosure no less formidable than that which bounds the range of practicable research activity. However, maintaining a passionate concern for the well-being of the children in one's own minority group or subculture is a legitimate interest, which routinely results in legitimate interventions. After the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, for example, the New York Ethical Culture Society went to work on behalf of Afro-American children and insisted that "equal protection under the law was being denied Negro children through the distorted world television offers them" (quoted in Montgomery, 1989, p. 22). Certainly, no less a claim may be offered today by gay and lesbian activists on behalf of the children of this subculture who, in ways both political and spiritual, are <u>their</u> children. Strategies for resisting negative societal reactions to activism on behalf of the gay or lesbian child should therefore occupy a prominent position within gay and lesbian politics.

<u>Invisbility vs. Innocence</u>

Much has been made of television's intrusion into the lives of children and the resulting "loss of innocence." No doubt, such concerns are well-founded. However, both researchers and child advocates must maintain a clarified sensitivity to the difference between promoting isolation and invisibility and promoting a loss of innocence. In <u>The Disappearance of</u>

Childhood, Postman (1982, p. 92) argues:

> The problem being discussed here is the difference between public knowledge and private knowledge, and what the effects are of the elimination of private knowledge by the full-disclosure media. It is one thing to say that homosexuality is a sin in God's eyes, which I believe to be a dangerous idea. It is altogether different to say that something is lost when it is placed before children's eyes.

It has apparently not occurred to Postman that some of those eyes belong to gay and lesbian children and that what may be lost is their sense of isolation, not their innocence.

Conclusion

The construction of various sexual realities and identities through communication processes is a dynamic steeped in political, social, cultural and even pathophysiological concerns. Uniquely situated as both a global and a private experience, mass communication usage contributes significantly to daily discourse about human sexuality. There is still much to be learned about the formation of those private world-views and public fears and commitments that we all hold in regard to our identity, sexual or otherwise. The media-enhanced creation of self is simply mysterious.

The word comes forth quite often from the television networks that programming themes are selected and distributed with a high sense of moral responsibility, with a respect for "balance" and "fairness" (Cross, 1983; Davis, 1987; Montgomery, 1989; Moritz, 1990). A statement made by Brandon Tartikoff, in response to community concerns over a controversial miniseries, is typical: "You may be sure that NBC's decisions in this matter will be made responsibly and with regard for the interests and sensitivities of all segments of our audience" (quoted in Montgomery, 1989, p. 137). Yet, the networks have shown an exiguous concern for the interests and

sensitivities of gays and lesbians in general, and gay and lesbian adolescents in particular. These segments of the audience are not a part of the "all" to which Tartikoff refers. Network executives--as well us the rest of us--should listen carefully to what Elie Wiesel had to say, as he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986: "Take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."

With characteristic strangeness, American popular culture appears more ready for the appearance of a gay Bigfoot than a gay teen-ager. The result is that gay and lesbian youth are routinely driven towards an isolated and invisible existence. And whether remedial messages are distributed from mainstream or alternative sources, it is imperative that they be distributed. The vitality of gay and lesbian culture as a whole shares a certain and intractable connection to the well-being of gay and lesbian youth.

More than the status of gays and lesbians is at issue here, of course. As noted, all factions of the American tribe--and of the global village--stand to benefit from a fuller appreciation of homosexuality. Concluding her examination of advocacy groups and entertainment programming, Montgomery (1989, p. 224) writes:

> The economic marketplace is not synonymous with the marketplace of ideas. While certain segments of the population may be well served as consumers, the public as a whole will not be well served as citizens. If present trends continue, voices in our pluralistic society will be further marginalized, circumscribed, or excluded.

James Baldwin, who speaks both as an African-American and gay man, writes: "It is a terrible, an inexorable, law that one cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one's own. . . ." (1960, p. 66). He also states:

> This is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive

> them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it . . . . But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime (1963, p. 19).

Mainstream, commercial television is not innocent in contributing to the symbolic annihilation, silencing and, ultimately, oppression of gay and lesbian youth. But the power of its oppression is precisely drawn from the range of social phenomena that constitute gay and lesbian adolescents as a uniquely vulnerable category, and in contributing to those phenomena we may all be complicit. A greater awareness of this unique and weighty problematic will at least ensure that our complicity does not become criminal.

Footnotes

[1]Evidence of this interpretive practice is not limited to academic investigations of the media usage routines of gays and lesbians or critical deconstructions of homosexual subtexts in heterosexual texts (e.g., Ellsworth, 1986; Wood, 1983). Uniquely, gay and lesbian popular culture is replete with examples of oppositional interpretations, which occupy a significant position within media--news features in the gay press, cartoons, film reviews, books--produced by and for the subculture. A good example of such oppositional-interpretation-as-pop-commodity is film critic Boyd McDonald's (1985) compilation of essays he wrote for Christopher Street, New York Native, and Philadelphia Gay News. That such oppositional readings represent a viable commercial commodity reflects the heightened significance of this practice for gays and lesbians.

[2]Our use of the term "heterosexism" conforms to the definition provided by Goodman, Lakey, Lashof, and Thorne (1983, p. 29):

> The term "gay oppression" is often used to refer only to the fact that some people are looked down upon and discriminated against because of our sexual preference (sic). The term "heterosexism," on the other hand, refers to the cause of the oppression--the socialization of all people to fear their own and each other's homosexuality--and the reinforcement of traditional dominant male/passive female social/sexual relationships. Heterosexism makes an institution out of heterosexuality and enforces it through ideology and social structure.

[3]The National Gay Alliance for Young Adults (NGAYA) sponsors programs in education, socialization and research, and an annual National Gay Youth Conference (NGAYA, Inc., P.O. Box 190426, Dallas, TX 75219-0426). Books designed for young gays and lesbians include Alyson (1980) and Heron (1983).

[4]This is so despite the fact that "the audience" might not be as put off by homosexual themes as the critics and censors suggest. "Interestingly," Moritz (1990, pp. 15, 16) reports, "even though the network executives downplay their commitment to lesbian and gay offerings when it is juxtaposed to The New Puritanism, audience response and advertiser concerns have not been particularly directed at these programs. . . . (N)etwork censors confirm that homosexuality is not the topic that generates the most controversy nor the most critical response."

[5]Our purpose here is not to contribute to current debates about Noelle-Neumann's thesis or offer a refinement or test of the spiral of silence model, though these may be possible outcomes from the research program we suggest. We are aware that the spiral of silence theory works its most comprehensive explanations in "situations of choice," such as political elections, and "explaining people's expectations of the outcomes of collective choice situations" (Taylor, 1983, pp. 124, 125). As such, our much broader use of the theory here might be viewed as awkward.

Nonetheless, such application provides a compelling organizational scheme that offers provocative suggestions for linking the experiences of gays and lesbians to their mass mediated representations. The unique situation of gays and lesbians as a "self-identifying" minority only underscores the relevance of theories of public opinion for understanding the homosexual experience. Moreover, Noelle-Neumann (1974, p. 50) herself has pointed out that the analytic technique associated with the spiral of silence model, ". . . can be applied to . . . all spheres in which the attitude and behavior of the individual is governed by the link between his own convictions and the results of his observation of the social world."

[6]Herdt (1989b) correctly points out that contemporary gay and lesbian youth exist in a social context that differs significantly from that in which many homosexual adults grew up. As such, the childhood recollections of adults cannot be taken to represent the experiences of gay and lesbian adolescents in today's world. Certainly, this is a valid point. The adult memories and observations reported here are not intended to correlate with the experiences of gay and lesbian teens; rather, these reports are intended to elaborate upon the symbolic annihilation/spiral of silence dynamics and to suggest the possibilities and rationale for engaging in more direct research along this line, utilizing both adult and adolescent subjects.

[7]This phenomenon can be further understood as an aspect of the "distinctiveness postulate" (Abrams, Sparkes & Hogg, 1985; McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978; McGuire, McGuire, & Winton, 1979). Broadly, this postulate is a case of selective perception and holds that ". . . an aspect of a complex stimulus is likely to be noticed in direct proportion to its distinctiveness in the environment in which it is perceived" (McGuire & McGuire, 1980). Thus, self image is directed by the individual's perceived uniqueness (i.e., "What makes me different?") and self images influence attention to environmental stimuli. So , we hypothesize that the television viewer attends most to content related to self-perceived uniqueness (what the individual thinks makes him or her "different"). We are currently conducting preliminary research testing the distinctiveness postulate and media usage routines, but data are not yet available.

[8]In contrast, Gross (1991) makes the following point in his reference to research by Austin (1981): "Cult movies like The Rocky Horror Picture Show provide occasions for meeting others who share a common perspective, and turning a media product into the pretext for communal interaction. . . . The Rocky Horror cult has served all over the United States as an opportunity for lesbian and gay teen-agers to meet and support each other in the coming out process." A brief first hand account of this phenomenon from the perspective of a young gay male is given by Fricke (1981). Clearly, the more quotidian media usage rituals like television viewing might not provide such a pretext, particularly for gay and lesbian teen-agers. However, gay and lesbian adults do routinely gather together formally and informally in order to celebrate a number of media-based rituals that are unique to this subculture. Such rituals have involved an array of activities. Among the more common: watching The Wizard of Oz, Auntie Mame, Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf, Mommie Dearest, Rebel Without A Cause; participating in

drag impersonations of key film and recording stars (Bette Davis, Judy Garland, Joan Crawford, Bette Midler, Mae West, Barbara Streisand, Marlene Dietrich, Katharine Hepburn, Lilly Tomlin, Diana Ross); watching a video bar's carefully selected sequences of "campy" or somehow "classic" clips; attending a Dynasty party (or other program-based affair). For one of a number of informal accounts of such gay rituals and folkways, see Muchmore and Hanson (1986, pp. 112-149).

[9]Carl Rogers (1961, p. 39-40) has observed:

> My interest in psychotherapy has brought about in me an interest in every kind of helping relationship. By this term I mean a relationship in which at least one of the parties has the intent of promoting the growth, development, maturity, improved functioning, improved coping with life of the other. The other, in this sense, may be one individual or group.

Ideally, of course, these are the sorts of relationships gay and lesbian youth really need and deserve. But who will be the "other" for these children? The question becomes urgent through the obvious absence of helping relationships for gay and lesbian youth. That absence also underscores television's potential contribution here. While television is no substitute for interpersonal relationships, the medium does augment interpersonal realities and we do develop "relationships" with television and its various contents (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1989; Rubin & McHugh, 1987). And in that augmentation, television can be therapeutic.

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